UNITED NATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS SECTION

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A Commemoration of the End of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons and the 25th Anniversary of the Special Olympics International

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 15 October 1992, **Ms. Inez Wyngaarde-Mahajan**, Disabled Affairs Officer, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Office at Vienna; **Mr. George Smith**, Director of Sports Training and Education, Special Olympics International and; **Ms. Rachel Hurst**, Project Director of Disability Awareness in Action briefed NGO representatives on the progress made in addressing the concerns of disabled persons and the need for further action.

Ms. Inez Wyngaarde-Mahajan said the United Nations Office at Vienna was the focal point within the United Nations system for disability matters. The Centre coordinated the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, adopted by the General Assembly in December 1982. The programme of action shifted away from a charity approach towards empowerment of disabled persons. The General Assembly had proclaimed 1983 to 1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, to encourage policy-makers, planners, legislators and others to adopt enlightened disability policies and to provide a time-frame for the initial implementation of the World Programme of Action. The World Programme was a global strategy to prevent disability, enhance rehabilitation and provide for the full participation of persons with disabilities in social life and development. It explicitly recognized the right of all human beings to equality of opportunities, in effect extending the concept of human rights.

Number of disabled has increased

Despite progress in health care and rehabilitation in some countries, the number of disabled persons had increased during the Decade, especially in war-stricken areas and those affected by famine. Approximately 10 per cent of the world population had one or more disabilities. About 160 million were women and another 140 million were children. It was estimated that 300 million people with disabilities lived in developing countries, only one per cent of whom had access to basic health, education, and adequate sanitation services. These numbers would increase as world population and the number of armed conflicts escalated.

The main achievement of the Decade had been increased public awareness of disability issues. Many new organizations of disabled persons had been formed and strengthened. At the national level, disability issues were being included in censuses and household surveys. Statistical information on

disability, which in 1960 was available in only 15 countries, was now available in over 55. The Centre was promoting information exchange by organizing annual consultative meetings with non-governmental organizations. In addition, the Centre was establishing a Clearing-house Database on Disability-related Information and helping to develop policy guidelines and manuals on equalization of opportunities, among other subjects.

Need for national coordination

Unfortunately, many of the national coordinating committees established during the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) were disbanded at the end of the Year. National coordinating mechanisms were vital for policy development and implementation. In 1990, the United Nations established guidelines for assisting and encouraging national coordination. The draft Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons was a long-term plan which should help Governments and organizations to develop national action plans to help equalize opportunities and to support independent living.

Special Olympics: providing opportunities for the disabled

Mr. **George Smith** said that the Special Olympics was founded in 1967 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, after she had conducted a survey of opportunities for disabled persons in the United States, at the request of her brother, President John F. Kennedy. The objective of Special Olympics was to use sports as a way for communities to include people with mental retardation and other disabilities. Sports could be used to change public opinion about people with disabilities and to influence public policy.

Special Olympics and similar organizations used several methods to encourage society to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. They provided training on an individual basis so that people with disabilities could have the requisite skills to participate meaningfully alongside people without disabilities. The same rules and venues used for sports in community competitions were used in sporting events for the disabled. Under the Special Olympics Unified Sports programme, people without disabilities were placed on the same team as disabled athletes who shared the same level of skill. Special Olympics drew disabled athletes from 120 countries, who participated in 25 sports. Children as young as five years old trained for the Special Olympics, while the oldest athletes were over ninety.

Mr. Smith expressed concern for low birth weight and for narcotic drug abuse among pregnant mothers--leading causes of mental retardation.

He concluded by stating that he was honoured that his supervisor at Special Olympics was a disabled person.

Human rights, not charity

Ms. Rachel Hurst said Disability Awareness in Action (DAA) was a joint initiative by several international NGOs supporting the Decade of Disabled Persons, who sought to raise awareness of disability issues. DAA met the need for a coordinated mechanism to address goverments and the general public.

Ms. Hurst said the Secretary-General's message that disability policy had moved from charity to to a question of human rights, had to be spread to the international community. The common image of

disabled people as either "tragic but brave" or "super-heros surmounting every obstacle" had to be transformed to the reality of their potential as fully participating citizens.

DAA had been active in trying to get this message across. It had provided organizations of disabled people with practical information, such as how to work with the media. It had organized contacts between disabled people's organizations and governments. DAA had also encouraged disabled people around the world to write about their lives. Over 500 letters from disabled people in 26 countries--mostly developing countries--had been collected and sent to Heads of State for signature.

DAA had a small workforce of four people, who used the existing network of NGOs "to ignite a fire of activity and political action". Several speeches during the special plenary session of the General Assembly on 12 October 1992, held to commemorate the end of the Decade of Disabled Persons, reflected increased awareness of the disabled.

Ms. Hurst said that the DAA's experience and resources would be valuable in commemorating the International Day of Disabled Persons (3 December), proclaimed at the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly. "We must ensure that this International Day is not a day of standing at street corners collecting charity for outcasts, but is a day in support of the human rights for disabled people."

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THE UNITED NATIONS ROLE IN OUTER SPACE

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On 22 October 1992, **Mr. Nandasiri Jasentuliyana**, Chief, Office for Outer Space Affairs, United Nations Department of Political Affairs, briefed NGO representatives on United Nations activities relating to outer space.

Mr. Jasentuliyana said that the the United Nations had been the focal point for consideration of international space issues since the space age began over 30 years ago. The General Assembly had proclaimed 1992 as International Space Year, with the theme "Mission to Planet Earth", to highlight the importance of understanding the Earth as a single, complex, and interdependent system.

In 1958, the United Nations General Assembly established the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space to help coordinate space activities, as well as to ensure that all countries had access to outer space and to the benefits of space technology. The Committee was comprised of 53 Member States. Its secretariat was the Office for Outer Space Affairs, at United Nations Headquarters.

While the first satellites were used for space research, today's satellites were used routinely in communications, weather forecasting, surveying natural resources, navigation, mapping, and television broadcasting, as well as monitoring arms limitation agreements. Nearly every country used space technology. Satellites were used widely by the United Nations in its efforts to promote peace, security, and development. For example, the United Nations recently used remote sensing satellites in Cambodia to identify refugee resettlement areas.

International cooperation was essential to promote space activities and to minimize their cost. The United Nations promoted international cooperation in space by organizing two major world conferences, in 1968 and 1982. The United Nations created the Space Applications Programme, to provide developing countries with the information and training necessary to develop their own uses of space technology.

Legal framework and remote sensing

In 1966 the General Assembly adopted the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Explanation and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, (the Outer Space Treaty) which had now been ratified by over 90 countries. The Treaty established two basic

principles of space law: 1) no part of outer space may be claimed for ownership or exclusive use by any country, and 2) no nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction may be placed in outer space.

Numerous other space issues had been negotiated at the United Nations, including using satellites to broadcast television programmes directly to individual receivers in other countries, and using remote sensing satellites to collect information on the natural resources of other countries. With regard to the first, the General Assembly adopted a resolution in 1982 calling for the establishment of international television broadcasting by satellite only with the prior approval of receiving countries.

On the issue of remote sensing, the Committee finally reached a consensus in 1986, after 13 years of negotiations. It adopted principles which allowed countries to collect data globally while providing any country over which data had been collected access to that information at reasonable prices.

Following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in June 1992, the Committee agreed that satellite remote sensing was important for environmental monitoring and studying global change. It requested that the Office for Outer Space Affairs examine the results of the Conference and prepare a report on how the Committee could contribute to the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of UNCED.

Nuclear power sources in outer space

Establishing criteria for the safe use of nuclear power sources in outer space had been a priority for the United Nations. The Committee reached consensus on a set of principles, which were then adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 47/68 of 14 December 1992. In addition to criteria for safe use, the principles provide for publication of safety assessments of space-based nuclear power sources, procedures for notification in case of re-entry of radioactive materials, and clean-up assistance and compensation in case of contamination or damage.

The geostationary orbit and space debris

There had also been progress this year on the regulation of the geostationary orbit. Through the International Telecommunications Union World Administrative Conference on the Geostationary Orbit, a framework had recently been established to guarantee positions for developing countries while protecting the existing satellites of developed countries.

The Committee continued to express growing concern over space debris and decided to collect more information on the issue before discussing it formally in the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee.

For a comprehensive survey of international space activities, you may wish to consult Space Activities of the United Nations and International Organizations, (E.92.I.30).